Exposing the BNP-Jamaat Coalition's 2001 Crimes: Corruption, Human Rights Violations, Extrajudicial Killings, and Misleading Actions

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Important Note: Before proceeding, please be aware that this post contains graphic images of violence. If you have a heart condition or are sensitive to such content, then it is strongly recommended to reconsider reading.

Abstract:

This paper urgently calls for the awakening of the people of Bangladesh regarding the heinous and unbearable crimes committed by the BNP-Jamaat coalition government from 2001 to 2006. It examines the emergence of terrorism during this period, highlighting both visible and covert government support for such groups. The study delves into rampant corruption, religious extremism, and the violence faced by religious minorities, particularly Hindus and Christians, as well as the systemic torture of Ahmadiyya Muslims. Additionally, it discusses the destruction of state institutions and the state-sponsored so-called anti-terrorism operations aimed at dismantling the then-opposition Awami League and its allies. Through this exploration, the paper underscores the critical need for accountability and vigilance in safeguarding the rights and dignity of all citizens in Bangladesh.

Introduction:

The four-party alliance, riddled with fundamentalist and communalist forces, rose to power following the 8th general elections on October 1, 2001. Since then, under the leadership of Khaleda Zia and Motiur Rahman Nizami, the coalition government has committed a range of human rights violations that are unimaginable in any sovereign, independent state. This government has set stark examples of torture and killings targeting minority religious and ethnic communities, opposition leaders, activists, sympathizers, intellectuals, and professionals who advocate secular democracy. Government and semi-government employees, members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, journalists on duty, and others have also been subject to these atrocities. Furthermore, the government has allowed extrajudicial killings by newly formed law enforcement agencies, obstructed peaceful meetings and processions of opposition parties, disrupted social and cultural programs, mistreated women, curtailed judicial authority, and placed it under the executive branch's control. Perpetrators have been granted immunity, mass arrests have been made on flimsy grounds, and opponents have been persecuted in prison cells and police custody. Most egregiously, victims have been deprived of due process and justice—examples reminiscent of a 19th-century colony.

The United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and eight additional binding charters to safeguard the freedoms, rights, and dignity of people in all nations. Furthermore, the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees 23 articles dedicated to the fundamental rights of its citizens. Yet, since the four-party coalition assumed power, human rights have been continuously violated in Bangladesh, constituting a flagrant breach of both the United Nations charters and the country’s own Constitution.

The Constitution of newly independent Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, incorporated the essence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other relevant United Nations documents. It took a groundbreaking stand by adopting secularism as a core state principle, prohibiting the formation of political parties based on religion, and seeking to eliminate all forms of repression, strife, deprivation, and discrimination in the name of religion. However, after the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Generals Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad seized power and altered the Constitution’s secular and humanistic nature through the fifth and eighth amendments, respectively, introducing a communal character. As a result, Bangladesh can no longer claim to be officially committed to human rights, largely due to the Islamization of its Constitution.

Image: In Bangladesh, a Hindu man was assaulted by a group of Muslims in a mosque. He was captured while heading home after being near the mosque. Following Friday prayers, the Muslims emerged from the mosque and seized the first Hindu they encountered. Mr. Vimal Patak, a Bangladeshi-born Hindu, was brutally beaten to death with sticks as Muslim clerics reportedly chanted, "Kill the Kafir!" (a term for non-Muslims). With folded hands, Mr. Patak pleaded for his life but tragically succumbed to the brutal attack. Source: Hindu Jagruti.

First Example:

Although the unprecedented levels of persecution suffered by minority religious and ethnic communities in Bangladesh following the coalition government's ascension to power have subsided to a certain extent, non-Muslim individuals still fall prey to numerous forms of discrimination, insecurity, and panic. Bullying of minority Hindus and the unlawful appropriation of their lands and properties continue unabated in remote areas of the country.

In October 2005, the Nirmul Committee published a white paper detailing 1,500 days of repression against minorities in Bangladesh, marking four years of the coalition government's tenure. The paper documented approximately 5,000 incidents of murder, plunder, and repression reported in 16 national dailies, as well as in various national and international human rights organizations' reports and photographic evidence, which the government cannot deny. What is even more appalling is that the victims of these repressions have been deprived of justice in 99 percent of cases, with the communal perpetrators remaining unpunished.

Since the coalition government took power, more than a thousand articles and features have appeared in the press addressing this issue, urging the government to put an end to communal persecution. However, the government has shown little concern in this regard. Exasperated by the repressive mindset of the coalition government, I wrote in August 2002: "The kind of tyranny that the religious minorities of Bangladesh have had to endure since the general elections in 2001 is unprecedented. Since the beginning of the election campaigns, voters from Hindu-inhabited areas have been bullied; their homes, businesses, and hearths plundered; many of their dwellings set ablaze; the wealthier members of the minority community held to ransom; and, in some cases, they were killed, with their women raped. All of this was orchestrated to instill a reign of terror among them, compelling them to either abandon their localities or refrain from going to the polling centers to exercise their right to vote.

"On behalf of the Nirmul Committee, we visited various Hindu-inhabited areas prior to the elections and recorded testimonies from the terrified and bullied minorities. Both Jamat-e-Islami and BNP resorted to extreme forms of communal antagonism during their election campaigns. While visiting the constituency of notorious war criminal and Jamat leader Delwar Hussain Sayeedee, MP, in Pirojpur, we heard party leaders and activists chanting shameful slogans, claiming that this year's election was a battle between Muslims and Hindus, in the presence of none other than the incumbent Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Notably, the main rival of Sayeedee in the election was Advocate Sudhangshu Shekhar Halder from the Awami League. Even a responsible BNP leader like former President Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury spread communal hatred. Such pre-election propaganda laid the groundwork for the post-election communal violence that we later witnessed.

“The Nirmul Committee, Ain-o-Salish Kendro (ASK), Sammilito Samajik Andolon, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, and many other national and international human rights organizations compiled statistics on incidents of communal repression in Bangladesh following the 8th general elections. Almost all newspapers in the country, including pro-government ones, reported on the communal atrocities that affected every corner of the nation. However, obtaining accurate statistics on these incidents is nearly impossible due to several factors. First, as the perpetrators were associated with the ruling BNP-Jamat alliance, the victims were often reluctant to file complaints with the police for fear of further brutality. This fear also prevented victims from disclosing their ordeals to journalists and human rights activists. Second, it is nearly impossible to learn about incidents of repression occurring in remote, inaccessible regions. Third, in cases of rape and abuse, victims rarely report to the police due to fear of reprisals and the social stigma attached. In many Asian countries, including Bangladesh, victims of rape are often scorned, and in some instances, they are more despised than the perpetrators. Fourth, since the government categorically denied any communal repression from the outset, police frequently refused to entertain complaints from victims. Fifth, thousands of Hindu families who fell victim to election-related communal violence sought refuge in India to save their lives, having lost their honor, relatives, properties, and homes. Thus, collecting accurate statistics on these incidents is virtually impossible.

Image: Victims of religious extremism.

"If the newspaper reports and those from various human rights organizations are anything to go by, it can be safely concluded that such large-scale communal violence had never occurred in Bangladesh, except during the nine-month Liberation War in 1971. However, in 1971, it was the external (Pakistani) occupation forces that were responsible for such persecutions. The recent wave of communal repression is even more outrageous than that of 1971, as it was instigated not by external forces but by Bengalis, who are the neighbors or fellow villagers of the victims. Those who fled the country in 1971 to save their lives eventually returned. I had the opportunity to speak with the victims of this latest wave of communal repression. They fled the country, and they told me they would never return to Bangladesh.

The recent wave of communal repression, which first emerged right after the caretaker government took over, gained further momentum after the general elections. In the first three months of the incumbent coalition government’s tenure, there was never a day when incidents of communal repression did not occur somewhere in the country. This time, incidents of plunder, arson, extortion, and rape outnumbered those of killings. The victims of rape range from six-year-old toddlers to elderly women aged 60, while those of killings include newborns and individuals as old

as 75. Many of the victims of killings were Hindu priests, Buddhist monks, and religious scholars, who were practically incapable of harming anyone."

Image: Victims of religious extremism.

News of communal repression continued to appear in the press routinely. After visiting the affected areas, various political parties and human rights organizations prepared detailed reports portraying the situation of repression and sought redress from the government. Regrettably, the government turned a blind eye to all of this. Frustrated by governmental indifference, Ain-o-Salish Kendro, a local human rights organization, lodged a case with the High Court, which subsequently issued a rule nisi to the government in this regard. It has now been nine months, and the government has yet to respond. On the contrary, both the Prime Minister and the Home Minister have categorically denied the incidents of repression and condemned the reports published in major newspapers as fabricated, exaggerated, and concocted by a particular party. While visiting Dhaka, the Secretary General of Amnesty International met with both the Prime Minister and the Home Minister to express grave concerns about the ongoing communal repression. However, the top echelons of the government have consistently shown little concern about this issue.

Image: So-called Muslim fundamentalists opened fire on Professor Muhari, a renowned Bangladeshi Hindu educationalist. Source: Mukta Mona.

As the government repeatedly denied incidents of communal repression, the police failed to take effective measures against the communal thugs. This government lethargy only served to encourage the perpetrators to launch communal assaults of even greater magnitude. Many victims reported their plights to the press and human rights activists; however, the ruling party's musclemen, along with the partisan police, intimidated them into testifying in writing that they had not been harassed and that the newspapers had only published baseless stories. Furthermore, the aggrieved and reluctant Hindu community was compelled, in many places, to observe Durga Pooja—the largest religious festival of Bengali Hindus—with feigned festivity last October, creating the illusion that they lived in great peace in Bangladesh.

In reviewing the well-planned incidents of communal repression during this period, sociologists and political observers have characterized them as a form of "ethnic cleansing." Even two and a half months before the elections, fanatics belonging to the ruling BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami in remote areas openly declared, "Hindus can no longer live in Bangladesh." The ruling alliance and their

sympathizers have assumed that anyone who is not a Muslim by faith is a supporter of the Awami League (AL)—the main opposition party—and that the easiest way to weaken the AL is to persecute the minority non-Muslim communities. In the view of these fundamentalists, if non-Muslim communities become frustrated by such persecution and leave the country, it will 1) dent the AL's vote bank and 2) enable them to transform Bangladesh into a monolithic Muslim state like Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Image: Women victims of religious extremism in Faridpur.

"We have extensively visited the affected areas and discovered that religious minorities, regardless of their political affiliations, have fallen prey to communal violence. Jamaat-e-Islami ruffians in Chittagong killed elderly educationist Professor Gopal Krishna Muhuri, who was a member of the Workers' Party, not the Awami League. In Chittagong, individuals such as Buddhist Monk Gyanjoti Mahathero, Monk Dulal Barua, and Hindu priest Madanmohan Goswami, who had no involvement in politics, were mercilessly slaughtered. In Sirajganj, the mother of gang rape victim Purnima, Basonarani, told us that they had not been spared even after affirming their support for the BNP. Thus, it would be imprudent to assume that only pro-AL minorities fell victim to communal repression. While it is true that political motives have led to the torture of leaders and activists from the Awami League and other opposition parties over the last ten months, the repression of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities is driven by a communal agenda—an ambition to transform Bangladesh's pluralistic society into a monolithic one."

নৃশংস গ্রেনেড এর আঘাতে চোখে বিস্ময় আর দেহে যন্ত্রণা নিয়ে পড়ে আছেন এক আওয়ামী লীগ কর্মী, পাশে নিহত আওয়ামী লীগ কর্মী রেজিয়া বেগম ।

With mystery at looking and agony at body, Awami League (AL) activists were laid on the street along besides the dead body of a fellow Rezia Begum and others.

মৃত্যুর উলাস নৃত্য।

Naked dance of death!

শেখ হাসিনার ব্যক্তিগত নিরাপত্তাকর্মী মাহবুব নিজের জীবন দিয়ে প্রমাণ করে গেলেন, শেখ হাসিনার ভ্যানগার্ডরা মৃত্যুকে পরোয়া করেনা।

Mahbub, a member of personal security wing of Sheikh Hasina, proved that vanguards of Sheikh Hasina did not fear the death.

Second Example:

The persecution of the minority Ahmadiyya Muslim community by the coalition government in general, and specifically by the two fundamentalist components of the alliance, namely Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Islamic Oikko Jote (IOJ), has become a regular phenomenon. Various national and international human rights organizations, including the United States and many European countries, have frequently condemned these actions; yet, the situation has hardly improved.

Since the creation of Pakistan, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community has faced the wrath of the JI, becoming one of its primary targets. In 1953, JI extremists killed at least 20,000 Ahmadis, including women and children, in Lahore, Pakistan. Before the party came to power in Bangladesh, several of its allies launched deadly assaults on Ahmadis in various parts of the country, destroying their mosques and even setting fire to the holy Quran and other scriptures in the victims' possession. After coming to power in October 2001 through its alliance with the BNP, the JI, IOJ, and their ally Khatm-e-Nabuwat, along with many other fundamentalist groups, repeatedly attacked the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. They bombed and seized their mosques, resulting in many devotees being killed or wounded, and incited further violence against Ahmadis through extremely hateful speeches and campaigns. Nevertheless, none of the perpetrators, masterminds, or killers faced punishment; indeed, they were not even brought to trial. It is hardly surprising that they were not held accountable. In an attempt to appease its fundamentalist allies, the government banned all publications of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, effectively preventing them from preaching their faith. Despite widespread condemnation both domestically and internationally, the coalition government continues to pursue the same old policies of Ahmadiyya-bashing.

In a blatant emulation of Pakistan, the JI has submitted a bill in Parliament seeking the enactment of blasphemy laws aimed at severely targeting the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, the Christian community, and free thinkers who subscribe to liberal ideologies. We have reason to apprehend that JI leader Nizami and his associates may successfully enact these blasphemy laws in Parliament at an opportune time. Once they achieve this nefarious goal, the repression of various forms of liberal thought and practices will gain legal legitimacy, as seen in Pakistan.

Regarding the repression of the Ahmadiyas, I wrote an article last year (2005) stating, “Communal attacks on the Ahmadiya Muslim community have increased to an alarming extent since the four-party alliance came to power in October 2001. The recent incidents of repression in Satkhira bear testimony to this fact. From April 17 to 20, 2005, communal perpetrators ransacked houses belonging to the Ahmadiyas in the Shyamnagar area of Satkhira, primarily targeting women and local Ahmadiya mosques.”

Image: Newspaper headlines about the corruption of Koko, the younger son of Khaleda Zia, dated December 19, 2008.

The incidents of repression against the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and the desecration of their mosques in Satkhira are not isolated events. Forewarned, religious fanatics desecrated the Sundarbans (Ahmadiyya) Mosque in Satkhira and hung their signboard at the site of the mosque, similar to how musclemen affiliated with the Khatm-e-Nabuwat Movement, an ally of Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), had previously razed Ahmadiyya mosques in Bogura, Chittagong, Patuakhali, and Khulna, posting their signboards on the ruins with police patronage. As in other locations, the police in Satkhira abetted the perpetrators. This constitutes a flagrant violation of the Constitution of Bangladesh as well as the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Although acts of repression against the Ahmadiyya community have occurred in many areas, the incidents in Satkhira are particularly notable. The perpetrators, while displaying offensive signboards at the mosque site, raided the homes of Ahmadiyya community members, subjected them to physical torture, and looted their possessions. Two seriously injured Ahmadiyya women were taken to a hospital in Dhaka. On April 19, leaders of the 14-party alliance and civil society representatives visited them in the hospital. While suffering in pain, the two victims—Ferdousy Begum and Rahima Akhtar—narrated their ordeals in trembling voices. On the same day, the Ameer of the Ahmadiyya community in Bangladesh, Professor Meer Mubashwer Ali, held a press conference in Dhaka, presenting video footage that depicted the terrorist attacks launched by the

Khatm-e-Nabuwat in Satkhira, which left at least 50 Ahmadiyyas injured. Human rights activists and civil society leaders, among others, attended the press conference.

Image: Women being beaten for participating in a protest.

Concerns raised by civil society regarding human rights violations in Bangladesh are not new. It was the media, human rights organizations, and intellectuals who first protested the unprecedented levels of minority repression that facilitated the rise of the fundamentalist coalition government. Leaders from civil society and media representatives rushed to the affected areas, collected statistics on the repression, comforted the victims, and urged local administrations and lawyers to take urgent action to halt the tyranny and provide legal assistance to the victims. However, local administrations rarely took legal action against the perpetrators, who not only supported the coalition government but also included a terrorist clique loyal to it. These administrations are well aware of how members of parliament (MPs) and other leaders from the two extremist factions of the coalition government consistently vilify this vulnerable religious community. It is important to note that three of the five MPs from Satkhira, the district where Khatm-e-Nabuwat militants have instigated a reign of terror, belong to Jamaat-e-Islami.

The international community openly praises the civil society of Bangladesh for its active role in protecting human rights. Unfortunately, the Taliban-leaning coalition government and its two fundamentalist allies have persistently concocted "conspiracies" against such civil society initiatives. To express our solidarity with the victims, we attended a press conference organized by the leaders of the Ahmadiyya community at Bakshibazar, Dhaka, on April 19, 2005. Our sole contention was that the common people of Bangladesh are fundamentally different from, and have nothing to do with, the spiteful Jamaat-e-Islami or the Khatm-e-Nabuwat thugs.

Image: Matia Chowdhury (born June 30, 1942) is a Bangladeshi politician who has been seriously harassed by the BNP-Jamaat government.

The number of militant fundamentalists is barely a million. However, the vast majority of the country—139 million people—have never approved of any form of extremism, militancy, or assault on innocent individuals in the name of Islam, nor will they ever do so in the future. The more pain that the Jamaat-e-Islami fundamentalists and their associates inflict on the people by misusing power, the more they are abhorred.

In a video I saw, a Khatm-e-Nabuwat leader from Bogra was lambasting the elderly human rights campaigner Justice K. M. Sobhan in utterly vulgar language. At Nakhalpara in Dhaka, Khatm leaders made extremely offensive and provocative remarks about Ahmadiyya sympathizers, including Professor Kabir Chowdhury, Dr. Kamal Hossain, Justice K. M. Sobhan, and myself. These remarks incited their militant members, who assaulted Professor Humayun Azad with swords and daggers in a medieval fashion. In all likelihood, they will launch more such attacks in the future. However, readers of newspapers and the millions of people in the country cannot accept such indecent and violent conduct.

Our presence at the press conference called by Ahmadiyya leaders on April 19 was not well received by the notorious war criminal Mowlana Mannan's newspaper, The Daily Inqilab, which invented an anti-Islam and anti-Bangladesh conspiracy regarding our sympathies for the Ahmadiyya victims. The daily published an editorial stating, "We are concerned about the Shyamnagar incidents, albeit they occurred discretely in only a handful of villages. The situation has been deliberately made confrontational overnight at a time when premeditated anti-Bangladesh propaganda at home and abroad has reached extreme proportions. The smear campaign is designed to portray Bangladesh as a terrorist country and a safe haven for so-called Muslim militants while inciting anti-Muslim international groups to harm Bangladesh. Despite repeated denials from the coalition government and all patriotic quarters, the propaganda from anti-Bangladesh cliques has not subsided; rather, their diverse activities are on the rise. As part of a deep-rooted conspiracy, various countries and organizations have publicly supported these cliques. In the absence of any evidence for such

allegations, these vested interests are working to exacerbate the situation further. On many occasions, acts of sabotage have become apparent, corroborating that anti-Bangladesh and anti-Muslim entities have used the Qadianis (i.e., the Ahmadiyya Muslim community) to fulfill their nefarious and destructive agendas for quite some time. To be honest, the Shyamnagar incidents reek of sabotage because a particular faction has deliberately made Shyamnagar appear belligerent at a time when peace and harmony are prevailing throughout the country, and the government, along with patriotic quarters, is busy trying to counteract anti-Bangladesh propaganda. Moreover, the leaders of these infamous cliques rushed to the headquarters of the Qadianis in no time, raising a hue and cry about alleged repression against them. Newspapers loyal to them made a mountain out of a molehill without any reservations. All of this gives us reason to suspect an anti-Bangladesh and anti-Muslim scheme behind the Shyamnagar incidents." (The Daily Inqilab, April 21, 2005)

If The Daily Inqilab's views are to be taken for granted, we must acknowledge that the Ahmadiyas comprise a non-Muslim community. We have issued such an edict! It is we who have unleashed Khatm-e-Nabuwat fanatics on the Ahmadiyas to tarnish the image of the government as well as that of the country! It was at our instigation that Jamaat-e-Islami extremists massacred 20,000 Ahmadiyas in Pakistan in 1953! The falsehood and nastiness of The Inqilab people, like those of Jamaat-e-Islami, know no bounds.

US Ambassador Harry K. Thomas visited the Ahmadiya Complex situated at Bakshibazar, Dhaka, on April 22 to express sympathy for the victims. He stated that he would raise the issue of repression against the Ahmadiya community by religious extremists and the government's inertia regarding it in a meeting at the US State Department. (The Daily Bhorer Kagoj, April 24, 2005)

What will be the next course of action for the government, which is already losing considerable sleep over its tarnished image and that of the country? The local police have accepted complaints against 13 individuals, including two top leaders of Khatm-e-Nabuwat, and have banned any meetings or processions organized by them in Satkhira for one month. We wonder what will happen once this ban expires. Does the coalition government have the authority to arrest the leaders of Khatm-e-Nabuwat? The answer is a resounding 'NO' because they have close ties to Jamaat-e-Islami, a member of the government.

It is impossible for the government to deny the incidents of repression against the Ahmadiyya community, even though it has consistently denied the repression faced by other ethnic and religious minorities. This is due to the long-standing demands from two components of the ruling coalition, namely Jamaat-e-Islami and IOJ, that the Ahmadiyyas be declared non-Muslim. Under pressure from these two parties, the government was forced to ban all publications by the Ahmadiyya community in January 2004. Although the High Court has ruled to invalidate this

ban, if the pictorial stories regularly appearing in almost all major dailies are any indication, the police are being used as a force loyal to the notorious Khatm-e-Nabuwat.

"Almost all major dailies published reports detailing how Khatm zealots attacked the Ahmadiyas in Satkhira, regardless of age or gender, leaving dozens seriously wounded. The assailants looted their possessions and ransacked their homes, all in the presence of police and BDR (Border Guard Bangladesh) personnel. The on-duty police did not intervene to prevent the attacks or arrest any of the assailants. Even more appalling is that the local police station did not accept any complaints from the victims until April 22, 2005. Furthermore, the district and police administrations summoned the leaders of the Ahmadiya community in Satkhira to their headquarters, where they held them for several hours, intimidated them, and coerced them into issuing a statement claiming that they had not been subjected to any form of assault and that excellent peace and harmony prevailed in the locality."

Third Example:

In addition to inciting cruel assaults on ethnic and religious minorities, including the Ahmadiya Muslim community, the coalition government has adopted a highly repressive stance against major opposition parties in general and the Awami League (AL) in particular. The level of tyranny that the 57-year-old party has experienced over the past five years is reminiscent only of the conditions in Bangladesh under Pakistani military occupation in 1971. Since the coalition government came to power, party thugs and known killers have been unleashed on leaders and activists of the AL across the country. More than one hundred thousand AL leaders, activists, and supporters have been detained; thousands of AL leaders and activists, including former Finance Minister Shah A. M. S. Kibria, MP, Ahsanullah Master, MP, and central leader Ivy Rahman, have been killed. Additionally, thousands of AL activists and supporters have been permanently disabled due to bomb attacks and repressions. During remand, hundreds of thousands of leaders and activists, including Dr. Mahiuddin Khan Alamgir, Bahauddin Nasim, Mostofa Rashidee Suja, and Principal Matiur Rahman, have endured inhumane torture.

Image: Saber Hossain Chowdhury assisting severely injured individuals following the August 21, 2004 grenade attack aimed at assassinating Sheikh Hasina at Bangabandhu Avenue.

During the tenure of the incumbent coalition government, countless leaders and activists of the Awami League (AL) have been killed by partisan law enforcement agencies and allied thugs. A total of 22 individuals, including Ivy Rahman, were killed in a deadly grenade attack on August 21, 2004. More than three hundred leaders and activists, including the Leader of the Opposition,

Sheikh Hasina, were severely wounded. Ironically, following each attack on AL meetings that resulted in deaths, the coalition government invariably blamed the AL and India. Consequently, successive investigations have proven farcical. The AL has demanded international probes into the grenade attack of August 21, which left 22 dead, the grenade attack on Shah A. M. S. Kibria's meeting, which resulted in the deaths of five individuals, including Kibria, and the incident involving 500 bomb blasts across the country by militant fundamentalists on August 17, 2005. It is worth mentioning that Kibria was not only a politician from Bangladesh and an AL leader but also a former top United Nations official. His family has demanded an investigation into his killing under the auspices of the United Nations. Various national and international human rights organizations have supported their demand. However, the government has never heeded this request, thereby proving its responsibility for these attacks and killings.

Image: Saber Hossain Chowdhury assisting severely injured individuals, like Suranjt Sengupta, following the August 21, 2004 grenade attack aimed at assassinating Sheikh Hasina at Bangabandhu Avenue.

Charging at Awami League leaders and activists, lashing out at them, and arresting them with the aim of thwarting every strike and agitation program has become routine for the police. The most inhumane aspect of this is the utterly indecent manner in which the police treat female activists participating in processions. The police have become accustomed to tearing their clothes, beating them mercilessly, and arresting them by the dozens. Regarding these female activists, former Home Minister Altaf Chowdhury once remarked, "We have to identify whether they are men or women by undressing them." On April 30, notorious war criminal and the Prime Minister's parliamentary advisor, Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, quipped that overweight female Awami League activists who resemble cushions and flour sacks have taken to the streets. He claimed these women are engaged in destructive activities at Russell Square, Bangla Motor, and Zero Point, even daring to launch severe attacks on the police (The Daily Jugantor, May 1, 2006).

Such remarks from a person of the stature of a top advisor to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia illustrate the extent to which the coalition government's attitudes toward and policies regarding women are incompatible with the Constitution of Bangladesh and various charters of the United Nations.

When a leading figure of the ruling alliance can make such a vile remark about women, is it not a cry in the wilderness to expect their police force to exhibit any semblance of decency?

Image: Hefajat-e-Islami members indiscriminately vandalizing the Awami League office in Motijheel due to the inclusion of secularism in their constitution on April 10, 2013. Source: Salil Tripathi, https://mygoldenbengal.wordpress.com/2013/07/04/bangladeshs-medieval-urge

Ironically, the members of the police who have persecuted women from time to time are rewarded with undue promotions instead of punishments. The many-fold increase in violence against women including rapes and acid throwing in recent times is attributable to such attitudes of the government towards women. In most cases of violence against women, the perpetrators have been let off the hook or meted out only nominal punishments. In the event of repression on minority Hindu women, the perpetrators invariably manage to get away with it and it is the victims who are harassed instead. The violation of Purnima, an adolescent girl from the district of Sirajganj, is a case in point. Perverts belonging to the ruling alliance have raped hundreds of women the last five years. The victims range from eight-year-old children to 65-year-old women. These facts notwithstanding, hardly a dozen cases have been lodged with the police.

As a matter of fact, BNP thugs gang-raped 14-year-old Purnima at Ullapara under the district of Sirajganj eight days after the general elections. When her family went to the local police station to lodge a complaint, the police refused to entertain it. Finding no alternative, they obtained a certificate from the civil surgeon and lodged a case with the magistrate's court. Under Section 164, the magistrate recorded Purnima's statement in which she mentioned names of 15 perpetrators.

When the magistrate asked the police to arrest the culprits, only five of them were arrested. Afterwards, the local MP and other BNP leaders allured, and at the same time intimidated, the victim's family to withdraw the case. Purnima's family could effectively disregard all the lures and threats as local journalists, lawyers and the Nirmul Committee firmly stood by them. Subsequently, the local BNP MP filed a petition with the home ministry seeking reinvestigations into Purnima's rape case. Pursuant to this petition, the local police reinvestigated the case and issued a fresh charge sheet accusing local journalists and lawyers as well as Nirmul Committee leaders, who had indeed come forward to provide a traumatized Purnima with necessary medical and legal assistance on sheer humanitarian grounds. The real perpetrators managed to be freed on bail. Purnima's father outright rejected the fresh charge sheet and filed a petition three years ago seeking an immediate redress. Unfortunately, hearing on this petition has yet to start. Weakened by the physical assault of 2001, Purnima's father died last year. Communal culprits mercilessly beat her brother so much so that he eventually lost his sight. Their family business – a barber's shop – was razed to the ground in a series of attacks. Haplessly widowed, Purnima's mother is now trying to find her elder daughter the job of a domestic help. Purnima is in the dark as to when hearing on her father's petition will start or justice will prevail.

The term "Fatwa" (religious verdict) is another expression of torture inflicted on women. Over the past ten years, more than 300 women have fallen victim to Fatwas issued by uneducated religious bigots in rural areas. In many cases, these unfortunate women felt compelled to commit suicide to avoid further humiliation.

On January 1, 2001, a High Court bench in Bangladesh, comprised of Justice Mohammad Golam Rabbani and Justice Najmun Ara Sultana, declared Fatwas illegal. In their verdict, they urged the government to pass legislation in Parliament to prevent such unconstitutional acts of barbarism. The following day, Mufti Fazlul Haque Aminee, a fundamentalist lawmaker from the coalition government, severely criticized the High Court's judgment on Fatwa and labeled the two judges as "Murtad" (a person eligible to be killed). Various human rights organizations condemned Aminee's atrocious remarks about the judiciary and called on the government to take action, but all efforts proved futile. Fatwa remains prevalent in Bangladesh as Aminee and his associates continue to hold power.

Despite the fact that thousands of reports and articles have emerged in the press regarding a wide array of repressions against women, perpetrated under state patronage during the coalition government's tenure, the situation is gradually deteriorating.

Fourth Example:

Journalists, as a community, are often referred to as human rights defenders. Observers note that the level of oppression faced by the press and the journalistic community in Bangladesh during the reign of the current coalition government is comparable only to the brutalities inflicted by the Pakistani occupation forces during the Great War of Liberation in 1971. As an early victim of state-sponsored repression against journalists, I would like to share my experiences.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has historically been unkind to journalists as a whole. Following her rise to power for the first time in 1992, she ensured that journalists' unions were fragmented. Without offering any financial support, her regime laid off dissenting journalists from government-owned newspapers. I was among the earliest victims during Madam Zia's first tenure. Due to my involvement in the movement for the trial of the heinous war criminal Golam Azam in the People's Court, I was charged with sedition. When the lawsuit did not go in favor of the government, I was immediately dismissed from my position as Executive Editor of Bichitra, a widely circulated news weekly. Subsequently, more than a dozen prominent journalists, including Toab Khan, the editor of Dainik Bangla, were also dismissed, without any termination benefits provided to them.

Image: People were killed in the brush fire by Sbibir cadres of the Jamaat-e-Islami student organization.

After coming to power for the second time in October 2001 by forging an alliance with the anti-liberation Jamaat-e-Islami party, Madam Zia's regime had me arrested and imprisoned before anyone else. I was charged with visiting India and video-recording interviews with members of the

Hindu community who had been forced to abandon their homes and migrate to India due to state-sponsored repression. Additionally, I was charged with informing the BBC during an interview about the repression faced by minority ethnic and religious communities. The coalition government transformed my professional duties into sedition charges.

Since assuming power, the government has categorically denied incidents of repression against minorities. Leaders of the coalition government, including Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and her cabinet, have denounced reports of repression that appeared in various newspapers as "fabricated" and "exaggerated." They even labeled these reports as a "drama staged by the Opposition." Following my arrest, their desperation to conceal incidents of repression backfired. Various international organizations for journalists and human rights expressed deep concern for the repression of minorities while demanding my release. Journalists from many Western countries visited Bangladesh to investigate the condition of minorities. Despite the threats from the coalition government, the country's newspapers excelled in upholding the truth. Reports from internationally recognized human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as the country reports from the United Nations Human Rights Commission and the U.S. State Department, documented the repression of minorities and the flagrant violations of human rights in Bangladesh. These reports demonstrated that most national dailies not only alerted the citizens by exposing state-sponsored repression against minorities but also played a significant role in shaping public opinion at the international level.

The purpose of newspapers publishing reports on social disasters like communal repression and human rights abuses is to alert both the citizens and the government, prompting it to take swift measures to address these crises. However, the ruling alliance views newspapers as its "enemies" for reporting on the diverse range of state-sponsored attacks against minority Hindus aimed at eradicating minorities from the country. Unfortunately, this time, newspapers were the only entities standing by the victims of repression, even though progressive political parties in the country had played significant roles in resisting such social disasters in the past. Had it not been for the inertia of the non-communal, progressive political parties, communal repression would not have continued unabated to this day.

When the rise of extremism and communal repression in Bangladesh received extensive media coverage in the West, the coalition government vehemently protested and accused the media of spreading falsehoods. Journalists Zaiba Malik and Bruno Sorrentino—British and Italian nationals, respectively—visited Bangladesh in November 2002 to make a documentary film for BBC Channel 4. The government arrested them on charges of concealing their identities. Along with the duo, journalists Selim Samad, Priscilla Raj, and I were also arrested. Subsequently, journalist Enamul Kabir Chowdhury of BSS and eminent columnist Muntasir Mamoon were detained in connection

with bomb blasts in Mymensingh. Upon our release on bail, we informed the citizens about the inhuman physical and mental torture we had endured while in detention.

Image: Sylhet Government College burned by the Sbibir cadres of the Jamaat-e-Islami student organization.

By reporting incidents of government-sponsored repression, killings, corruption, and terrorism, the journalistic community as a whole incurred the wrath of the coalition government. However, journalists from remote areas suffered far worse than their counterparts in Dhaka. Members of the ruling alliance have so far killed more than a dozen journalists and physically tortured as many as 800, many of whom have endured prison terms on false charges. Others have been forced to leave the country. A total of 50 journalists and employees of the government-owned news agency BSS, including its Editor-in-Chief, Harun Habib, were dismissed solely because they were not loyal to the ruling alliance. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)—an international organization dedicated to promoting journalists' rights and security—and the International Federation of Journalists have identified Bangladesh as the most perilous and hazardous country for journalists. In February 2003, a panel of senior CPJ officials visited Bangladesh to investigate the reported incidents of communal repression. They spoke with victims and prepared their reports. The CPJ team faced unwarranted harassment from the intelligence wing of the coalition government.

After my release in January 2002, I stated at a press conference, "I have just graduated from a tiny prison cell to a bigger one." Like a prisoner, I am closely monitored even after my release. Intelligence agents keep my house under strict surveillance, follow me like a shadow, tap my phone, and censor my online communications in blatant violation of the basic human rights enshrined in the Constitution. Alliance terrorists have attempted to kill me more than once, not to mention the threats and abuse I have received in writing and over the phone. After being repeatedly threatened with dire consequences in 2003, I went to the local police station, but the police flatly refused to entertain my complaint. Subsequently, I lodged a lawsuit with the court, which directed the police to address my complaint and initiate an investigation into the incident, but to no avail.

Currently, while on bail in two different cases, I must attend court every month. With one of my legs broken for the past year and a half, I have to climb the stairs of the lower courts using a crutch. I wait for hours alongside murderers, thieves, and burglars to register my attendance and learn the next reporting date. For the past four and a half years, I have been compelled to go to court, and this is how I have been disciplined. Ironically, the government has failed to issue a charge sheet against me all these years. The cases have yet to begin. Nonetheless, I must endure all this. The coalition government is essentially adhering to the vindictive philosophy of the Queen of Hearts in Lewis Carroll's legendary novel, Alice in Wonderland, where she asserts that punishment should precede trial.

The brutal attacks on on-duty photojournalists at a Chittagong stadium on April 16, 2006, represent yet another example of the coalition government's spiteful attitude toward the journalistic community. Without any provocation, on-duty policemen led by Deputy Commissioner (Port) Ali Akbar Khan kicked and punched the journalists, mercilessly beating them with rifle butts. Eyewitnesses compared the incident to the mayhem perpetrated by the Pakistani occupation forces in 1971.

Image: A Hindu woman's house being burned. These attacks were allegedly carried out by groups such as Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami, Harakat ul-Jihad-i-Islami/Bangladesh (H.U.J.I.-B.), and Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (J.M.J.B.), all known to have links with al-Qaeda. The government at the time demonstrated a clear reluctance to take decisive action against terrorism.

The account of the incident given by the ruthlessly beaten elderly photojournalist Alhaj Zahirul Haque, currently a correspondent for the Kolkata daily Aajkal, is likely to make any conscientious individual feel profoundly aggrieved and upset. Haque stated, "...Ali Akbar Khan, along with 25 to 30 policemen, was entering the stadium, abusing journalists in the most obscene language. Standing beside Deputy Commissioner (Reserve) Humayun, I requested Khan not to insult us, informing him that both Humayun and the Commissioner had taken it upon themselves to resolve the dispute. However, the violent Khan responded, 'You son of a bitch. I don't compromise with journalists.' As he said this, he began to punch me hard. Despite Humayun's repeated appeals, he continued to beat me until I collapsed on the ground. When a photojournalist from Daily Purbokon rushed to my aid, a policeman struck him on the head with his rifle butt, leaving it severely fractured. While Khan was assaulting me, his contingent encircled the other journalists and beat them mercilessly. Khan's punches damaged my teeth, and his kicks injured my ribs. At one point, he attempted to strangle me, but two journalists accompanying the Australian cricket team and an official from Ten Sports intervened, shouting at the top of their lungs and

pulling him away. Only God knows what might have happened to me otherwise. I witnessed the policemen descending upon the journalists in an unprecedented frenzy, beating them mercilessly with rifle butts. In their desperation to protect themselves, some journalists rushed to the tent of cricketer Ricky Ponting and his teammates, but to no avail. Fellow journalists came to our rescue and took us to Chittagong Royal Hospital. The Chittagong Union of Journalists, the Chittagong Metropolitan Union of Journalists, the Chittagong Press Club, Reporters' Unity, and the journalistic community as a whole strongly condemned this barbaric attack, resolving not to cover the game until exemplary punishment is meted out to Khan and his colleagues. With my eyes and chest badly affected, doctors advised me to seek treatment abroad as soon as possible. I have been a journalist for more than 45 years since the Pakistan period. I have photographed countless incidents, both political and otherwise, and witnessed numerous struggles. However, I have never before seen policemen assaulting on-duty journalists without any provocation. Such an attack on journalists is unprecedented and horrific. The Chittagong incident serves as a grim reminder of the cruelties inflicted by the Pakistani forces in 1971." (The Daily Jugantor, 18 April 2006).

The following day, various dailies published detailed reports on the nefarious activities of police officer Ali Akbar Khan. A report from Jugantor, titled "Billionaire Police Officer Ali Akbar Khan," states, "The audacity of Ali Akbar Khan, Deputy Commissioner (Port) of Chittagong Metropolitan Police, who unleashed medieval savageries on journalists, has created quite a stir in the police administration and beyond. He can only be compared to Kohinoor Mia, Deputy Commissioner (North) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, who earned a notorious reputation as a ruthless pro-BNP police officer through a multitude of unlawful activities. The coalition government has simultaneously rewarded both of them with undue promotions for their innate ability to vandalize peaceful processions and gatherings and to mercilessly beat anyone at any time.

"There are countless allegations of irregularities and corruption against the notorious police officer Khan, who desecrated the stadium and unleashed savage attacks on on-duty journalists without the approval of the Commissioner of the metropolitan police or the higher police authorities. In a very short time, he has amassed substantial properties and a vast sum of money. His subordinates are required to pay him a certain amount regularly to escape his wrath."

It is alleged that Ali Akbar Khan was an armed hoodlum associated with JCD—the student wing of the ruling BNP—during his time as a student. He hails from the Chandpur district, while his wife is from Comilla. Khan joined the Bangladesh Police as a Sub-Inspector in 1992. With the BNP in power, he committed brutalities against leaders and activists of the Opposition AL and subsequently left his position at the behest of a prominent female BNP leader. Later, in 1995, he was appointed to the Police cadre as an Assistant Commissioner after successfully passing the 15th

Bangladesh Civil Service recruitment test. His first posting was in the Riot Control Department. While serving as ADC in Dhaka, he gained notoriety for mercilessly beating AL parliament member Sohel Taj, son of former Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, in Dhanmondi in 2002. Khan's presence at any AL procession or gathering in Dhaka often results in ruthless baton charging and brutal beatings. As a reward for his actions, the BNP-Jamat coalition government appointed him Deputy Commissioner (Traffic) in the Chittagong Metropolitan Police.

In the wake of intense public backlash against the police action on journalists in Chittagong on 16 April, State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar expressed his regrets, suspended the responsible sergeant, and closed Khan. A probe committee has been established. However, based on our past experiences, closed officer Khan, like his colleague Kohinoor Mia, may very well receive further promotions, encouraging him to continue his assaults on political opponents. Regardless of how strongly the journalist community demands his punishment, it is unlikely that any action will be taken against him.

The brutal police action against journalists in Chittagong on 16 April is part of the ruling alliance's plot to tarnish Bangladesh's image through terrorism, murder, repression, and corruption. On-duty photojournalists have repeatedly faced beatings and harassment at the hands of the police during the tenure of the four-party alliance. The police have confiscated their films, broken their cameras, arrested them, and beaten them during remand. The police are acutely aware of the government's stance toward journalists; the more brutal a policeman is, the greater the reward he receives.

Image: Newspaper reporting on the terrorist attacks during the BNP-Jamaat government and its failure to protect the people and businesses.

Newspapers are referred to as the fourth pillar of the state. When any single pillar of the state is unstable, the effectiveness of the state as a whole is compromised. One of the key components of the coalition government is Jamaat-e-Islami, a party that sought to undermine Bangladesh during its birth in 1971, a time when it was ultimately defeated. Since the BNP-Jamaat alliance came to power in 2001, the leaders of these parties have become increasingly desperate in their attempts to avenge their defeat in '71. Their sole objective appears to be transforming Bangladesh into an ineffective, failed state. Without the writings of journalists, the public would have little opportunity to learn about the heinous actions of Jamaat-e-Islami, including acts of rape and genocide during the Liberation War. As long as the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government remains in power, the journalistic community will remain vulnerable to their wrath.

Image: Burned Buddhist status.

Fifth Example:

The image of Bangladesh has suffered serious setbacks, primarily due to the extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the coalition government rather than the repression of opposition political parties, intellectuals with divergent ideologies, professionals, and women. In the name of countering terrorism, 'Operation Clean Heart' was launched in 2002. Regarding this operation, I wrote: "Despite the fact that several thousand people have already been arrested in the military operation that began on October 16, 2002, in the name of countering terrorism, none of the blacklisted top terrorists have yet been apprehended. True, the 30,000-strong force has recovered some arms and detained a few petty criminals, but their conduct during these crackdowns amounts to a gross violation of the Constitution.

"By virtue of its utterly repressive measures against opposition political parties, religious minorities, freedom fighters, and employees of various government, semi-government, and autonomous organizations that believe in the spirit of the Liberation War, the fundamentalist, war-criminal-infested coalition government has set a precedent of state-sponsored terrorism. The fact that the government has consistently denied these actions has only served to embolden the real terrorists to continue their misdeeds.

"Every citizen feels aggrieved by the manner in which the administration has been transformed into a tool for harassment. Innocent people are being arrested under Section 54 and tortured during remand, while the directives of the higher courts go unheeded. In her televised speech marking the coalition government's first anniversary in office, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia repeatedly mentioned a flood of development and attributed all forms of political terrorism to the main opposition. After the Prime Minister claimed the prevalence of 'good governance,' it was scarcely a week before she deployed a 30,000-strong army contingent across the country to apprehend terrorists, keeping the civil administration in the dark and without declaring an emergency or consulting Parliament. By deploying the army, the Prime Minister has demonstrated that 1) the civil administration has drastically failed to contain the deteriorating law and order situation, and/or 2) she has little or no confidence in the civil administration. Such a lack of confidence in Parliament and the civil administration only serves to create conditions conducive to military rule.

"Constitutional experts have deemed such a military operation ultra vires to the Constitution. Reports published in various national dailies have made it evident that neither the Constitution nor criminal legislation was adhered to during these operations. The reports of post-arrest torture and killings in custody that surfaced in the newspapers were sufficient to provoke the international community, further tarnishing the already compromised image of the country."

Saber Hossain Chowdhury, a former state minister and political secretary to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is otherwise recognized as a thorough gentleman in the political arena. He was arrested without a warrant and detained for 17 hours in army custody before being handed over to the police. Similarly, opposition lawmaker and former minister Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, MP, was arrested under the same circumstances. Sheikh Selim has questioned the validity of his arrest under Section 54 and his three-day remand in court.

Over the past year, newspaper reports and the ongoing military operation have demonstrated that the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government has utterly failed to contain terrorism, despite coming to power with a pledge to eradicate it. It has been stated that the military was deployed to assist the civil administration; however, the conduct of army personnel during operations has fallen far short of this objective. In contrast, reports in the newspapers indicated that a police sergeant was humiliated for not saluting a junior army officer. [The Daily Sangbad, 23 October 2002] Army personnel are neither abiding by the Constitution nor adhering to criminal legislation during these operations.

The third part of the country's Constitution contains 23 articles pertaining to fundamental rights, some of which have multiple sections. Article 35 addresses protection regarding trial and punishment. Article 35(4) states, "No person accused of any offense shall be compelled to be a witness against himself." Article 35(5) reads, "No person shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment or treatment."

Torture of accused persons in police custody or on remand is not new in Bangladesh; however, since coming to power in 2001, the coalition government has shattered all previous records in this regard. Notably, during the last week of military operations, the army has surpassed a year's worth of police torture and harassment. The lead story caption in the 24 October issue of the Daily Janakantha reads, "Another dies in Gaibandha: toll rises to 7 in 7 days." Torture and deaths in army custody have added a new dimension to state-sponsored terrorism during the tenure of the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government.

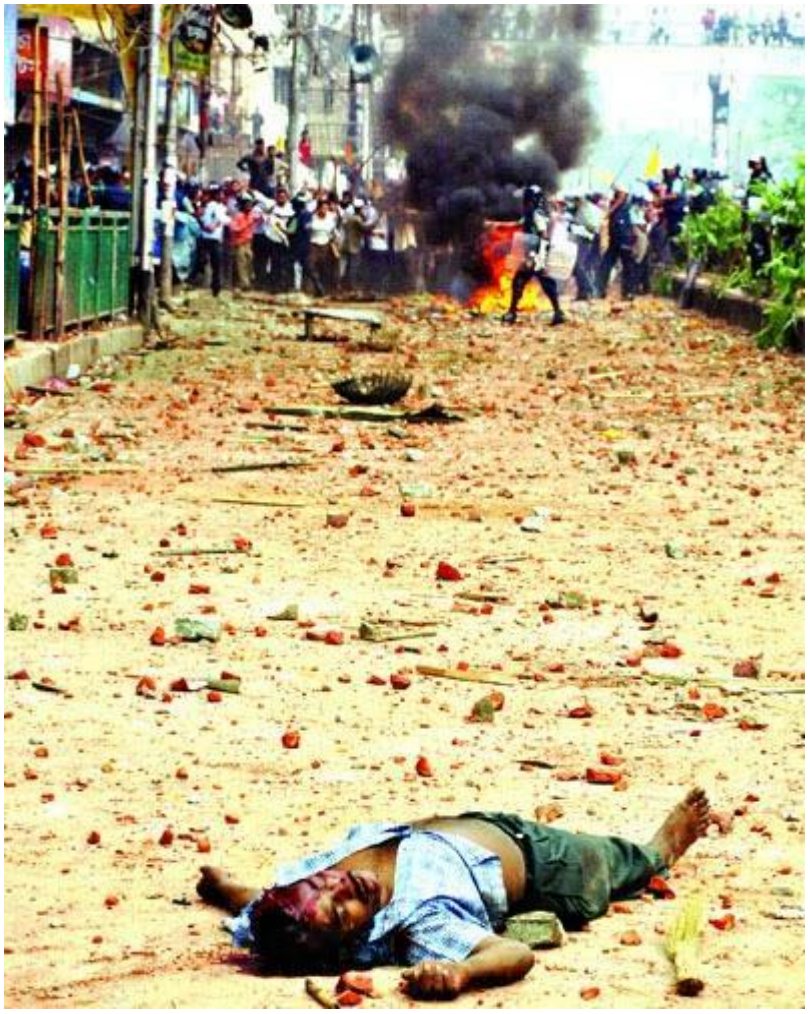

Image: Man killed in 2013 as Jamaat and Shibir try various tactics to counter Shahbagh protests. In desperation, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Chhatra Shibir employed multiple strategies to occupy Paltan or other key intersections in the capital in an attempt to counter the Shahbagh movement.

Family members of most victims of military persecution have alleged that their deaths resulted from torture in custody. The case of BNP leader Ratan Molla from Gopalganj exemplifies this. Alongside his family, the local civil surgeon has attributed his death to brutal torture in army custody. In regard to the death of one Afzal, the 23 October issue of the Daily Sangbad reported that "the death of Afzal Hossain (30) from Savar was due to ruthless torture. The post-mortem report, prepared in the presence of the local UNO (administrative head), identified torture as the cause of death. According to police and family sources, army personnel apprehended Afzal at noon on Monday. He was mercilessly tortured in custody and died that night. After the army informed the Savar Police Station of the incident, the police recovered the corpse the same night.

The postmortem report states that the body was retrieved from the mortuary of Savar Cantonment Hospital at 3:15 AM on Monday. There is a wound beneath his left shoulder, a mark of injury on his right arm, and evidence of being tied with ropes. Just beneath his knee is another severe wound, a bloodstained fracture.

Sources from the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) morgue noted marks of torture evident all over Afzal's body. Both of his legs from the knee down were badly scratched. His autopsy was conducted at the DMCH morgue on Monday morning in the presence of officials from Savar Police Station.

A physician from the forensic department attributed his death to violent torture in custody. Despite the resolute statements from family members, civil administration, and forensic experts about the torture, army personnel have continuously insisted that detainees are never tortured and that their deaths result from cardiac arrests.

Cardiac failures do not equate to unnatural deaths. A person may die of cardiac arrest even without being taken into army custody. However, under no circumstances can such a death be referred to as natural when someone is cold-bloodedly tortured and killed. "Deaths in custody" and "killings in custody" are not synonymous. Killings in custody represent the most appalling violation of human rights, a precedence set by the ongoing military operation. The remarks from the government and army spokesmen regarding persecution in custody have long lost all credibility.

We have previously stated, and we reaffirm, that no government has the right to order the army or police to torture any accused individual in custody, regardless of the nature of the offense or party affiliations. Killings in custody constitute the most grievous of human rights violations. The Constitution of Bangladesh categorically prohibits such killings. According to newspaper reports, some victims were so severely tortured after their arrests that even the police refused to accept them. Family members of deceased Gopalganj BNP leader and freedom fighter Abul Khair Ratan Molla have alleged that army personnel tortured him to death, and the local civil surgeon has corroborated this allegation. Reports of inhumane repression suffered by Khulna Awami League leader and former lawmaker Mostofa Rasheedee Suja while in army custody have also appeared in newspapers (The Daily Janakantha, 20 October 2002).

In addition to reports on killings in custody, newspapers are inundated with news of various physical agonies suffered by detainees while in army custody, instances of people being arrested and detained without warrants, and valuables being seized without any confiscation orders. Can the concerned army officers cite a law under which all this is being carried out? Do they dare assert that they are not accountable to anyone for the unconstitutional activities committed by army personnel and that they are above all the laws of the land? The motive of the Khaleda-Nizami coalition government behind its efforts to incite conflict between the army, civil administration, and the general populace is becoming increasingly evident.

Operation Clean Heart lasted 86 days, during which a total of 53 individuals were killed in army custody, and more than a thousand were physically tormented. Many of those injured have suffered permanent disabilities. The coalition government has exonerated those responsible for these killings and tortures, resulting in justice remains a distant hope for the victims and their families. Not only should Prime Minister Khaleda Zia be tried in the domestic courts, but she should also be held accountable in the International Criminal Court for her crimes in relieving military perpetrators of the charges of killing.

Based on the experiences of Operation Clean Heart, the coalition government later established killer agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Cheetah, and Cobra, comprising both army and police personnel. Prior to World War II, Fascist Mussolini and Nazi leader Hitler created killer agencies like the Black Shirts, Brown Shirts, and Gestapo to suppress any opposition. Ironically, decades later, political ruffians associated with the four-party alliance in Bangladesh are following the same oppressive path.

Image: Countless people died when many grenades were thrown at Sheikh Hasina, the then-opposition leader, on August 21, 2004. The August 21 attack resulted in 24 deaths and more than 300 injuries. Source: The Daily Star, https://www.thedailystar.net/august-21-carnage/news/aug-21-attack-how-powerful-were-the-grenades-1644673

Interestingly, RAB (Rapid Action Battalion) has euphemistically labeled custodial killings as 'crossfire'. Each time someone is targeted and killed, a fabricated story follows, attributing the death to a crossfire incident between RAB personnel and the victim's alleged accomplices. These killings are not limited to leaders and activists of opposition political parties.

It is true that the government has occasionally arrested minor terrorists following major incidents, such as grenade attacks and bombings. However, some of these petty terrorists—some of whom belong to the ruling alliance—are being shot dead under the guise of crossfire to prevent them from revealing the identities of the real perpetrators. For example, the main witness in the murder of Awami League lawmaker Ahsanullah Master was killed in a 'crossfire'. Similarly, RAB killed the accused in the murder of journalist Manik Saha before the trial even began. Several petty terrorists were also killed in connection with the large arms haul at Chittagong port.

As a mere pretense, a few notorious criminals have been killed in 'crossfire' as well. From RAB's inception on 26 June 2004 until 30 September 2006, at least 600 people were killed in 'crossfire' incidents, and more than a thousand others were severely injured due to physical torture. The fabricated nature of RAB's accounts of these 'crossfire deaths' has become clear through the unguarded comments of alliance leaders. On numerous occasions, ruling alliance leaders have publicly stated that political opponents would be eliminated using the 'crossfire' tactic.

None other than the prime minister's parliamentary advisor, Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, during a meeting on 30 April 2006, warned 263 leaders and activists of the Fatikchari Awami League to abandon their political beliefs and follow the siratul mustakim (the straight path) by 31 May. Otherwise, he threatened, their days were numbered as they were on RAB's 'crossfire' list. (The Daily Prothom Alo, 1 May 2006)

The common narrative surrounding RAB's crossfire incidents is as follows: when RAB personnel took an arrestee to a location to recover arms, his accomplices opened fire on them, prompting a retaliatory response in self-defense that resulted in the arrestee being killed in the so-called 'crossfire.' Chowdhury's remarks only serve to substantiate that the narrative regarding RAB's 'crossfire' is, at best, fabricated. He has evidently acknowledged that those killed in these alleged 'crossfire' incidents are actually targeted beforehand.

There have been no cases filed with the police against most of the Awami League leaders and activists who were labeled as 'terrorists' and subsequently killed in 'crossfire.' Despite repeated appeals from international human rights organizations to cease such extrajudicial killings, the coalition government has continued to permit these actions. Moreover, by awarding the 'Independence Award' in 2006 to RAB, the government has effectively encouraged this lethal agency to escalate its killings and repressions at an even faster pace.

Sixth Example:

Since coming to power, the coalition government has created an environment of killings and torture, sparing no one from top political leaders and intellectuals to factory workers and peasants in rural areas. In an attempt to appease foreign masters and maintain power, the coalition government has shut down hundreds of mills and factories, including the Adamjee Jute Mills, thereby pushing thousands of workers to the brink of vagrancy. Farmers are being shot and killed like birds while demanding supplies of fertilizers, electricity, and irrigation. Hundreds of workers have suffered tragic deaths due to factory fires and building collapses, yet the coalition government remains indifferent to these events.

The May Day 2006 issue of the Daily Bhorer Kagoj published a report under the banner headline "Four-fifths of the 45-Million-Strong Labour Force Outside the Purview of the Labour Law," stating that more than 500 workers were killed and over two thousand injured or disabled in the garment sector during the tenure of the coalition government. It seems that the most expensive items are essentials, while human lives are treated as the cheapest commodity during the reign of Khaleda Zia and Motiur Rahman Nizami.

Image: Newspaper dated April 9, 2001.

In a country where human lives hold little to no value, demanding basic human rights and dignity is akin to a cry in the wilderness. Although the call for an independent human rights commission and the separation of the judiciary from the executive has gained momentum both domestically and internationally, the government has turned a deaf ear to these demands. Various international human rights watchdogs, including Amnesty International, have repeatedly urged the government to improve the country's human rights situation, but to no avail.

Back in December 2002, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia promised Amnesty's then-Secretary General Irene J. Khan that a commission would be constituted to investigate incidents of repression against religious minorities. Ironically, this promise has yet to materialize, and the repression continues unabated.

The anti-liberation Jamaat-e-Islami has gained a share of power, thanks to the power-hungry ruling BNP. Jamaat is squarely to blame for the genocide, rape, and various acts of vandalism committed during Bangladesh's war of liberation in 1971. The state has failed to prosecute top Jamaat leaders charged with war crimes from that time. Unless those responsible for genocide are brought to justice, they are likely to continue committing acts of violence. In Jamaat's vocabulary, 'genocide' is merely an ordinary term that evokes little fear. The culture of exoneration for killers and tyrants in Bangladesh stems from the state's failure to hold the perpetrators of the 1971 genocide accountable. Consequently, the Indemnity Ordinance, aimed at shielding the killers of the nation's founder, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was enacted. Similarly, four top national leaders who played pivotal roles in the country's liberation were brutally killed in government custody, and their killers evaded justice.

As long as killers and perpetrators remain unaccountable, incidents of killing and torture will continue to rise day by day. With the coalition government in power, it will be virtually impossible to reverse the deterioration of the human rights situation in Bangladesh.

We have consistently demanded that the real perpetrators, both inside and outside the administration, be identified and held accountable, rather than attributing blame to the state or the government as a whole. To end human rights violations, including killings and torture, compensation for victims must be sought directly from the perpetrators. If the state or government compensates the victims, the conduct and attitudes of field-level offenders are unlikely to change. Perpetrators, from top to bottom within the administration, must be brought to justice.

As the 9th parliamentary election approaches, both religious and ethnic minorities fear increased persecution compared to what we witnessed during the last election. Repression, mass arrests, and torture of opposition meetings and demonstrations are rising alarmingly. Even members of parliament are not spared from police raids. When constitutional avenues for political agitation are blocked by terrorism, unconstitutional forms of protest inevitably arise.

Image: Tarek Rahman, the invisible chairperson of the BNP, alongside the ruthless Jamaat leader.

The Four Party Alliance (FPA) government has completed all preparations to manipulate the upcoming election to ensure its victory. A peculiar voter list has been published by the most controversial election commission, which includes several million ghost names while excluding almost the same number of genuine voters, predominantly from minority communities and secular democrats. Nearly one hundred thousand Rohingya refugees' names are included in the voter list, as reported in national dailies. Most political parties have demanded the formation of a new election commission comprised of neutral individuals and the reform of the 'Caretaker Government' system; however, the FPA government has yet to take this issue seriously.

The European Union and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) have already expressed dissatisfaction with the performance of the election commission and the overall political atmosphere. The FPA government's strong obstinacy is leading Bangladesh toward civil unrest, and Islamic militant organizations are eagerly anticipating the opportunity to exploit this situation. We fear that incidents of killing, abduction, and repression against free thinkers, opposition party activists, and members of minority communities will increase significantly beyond what we have witnessed in the past. Before it is too late, human rights defenders around the world should step forward to protect human lives and uphold humane values.

Rep. of Bangladesh: This is the account representing the people of Bangladesh, embodying their voice, freedom, and values.

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